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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA - USAID/HAT - UPDATE ON HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN SOMALI REGION, JUNE, 2008

REF: ADDIS ABABA 1032

Summary

¶1. This cable provides a summary of the current situation in the Somali region based on field reporting by the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) regional government in Jijiga, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nation (UN) agencies. The cable draws exclusively from second hand sources due to security restrictions which have precluded visits by the USAID Humanitarian Assistance Team (HAT) visits to partner project sites in the region. The reports include a regional forum led by government in Jijiga, zonal and district level reporting from Warder zone, Geladi and Boh districts, meetings with UN staff from the region, and reports from UN agencies.

¶2. Overall regional government and agencies report a distressingly deteriorating situation with increased rates of malnutrition, outbreaks of acute watery diarrhea (AWD) migration of populations in search of food and water, and security problems. There is deep concern by UN and NGO partners that the crisis in Somali region is being forgotten by the international community in the face of the enormous food security crisis occurring elsewhere in the country. End Summary.

Security

¶3. Reports from the regional security meeting in Jijiga on June 24, 2008 indicate that the security services in Jijiga are on increased alert with checkpoints and visible security presence throughout the day, most likely a reaction to the ONLF offensive west of Degehabur on June 10. Rumors are circulating that military action in some parts of the region is imminent. Information from Gode also indicates an increased military presence, which observers interpret

as potential imminent action about to occur. Against this backdrop, an aircraft carrying MSF-Switzerland staff was detained in Fik and five national staff arrested by local authorities on June 19. Expatriates were not arrested. Up until now the 5 staff remain in custody without any stated reason. Further, in a communication to the United Nations on June 30, 2008, MSF/Switzerland informed the UN and donors of its decision not to continue its medical intervention in Fik zone. Other arrests have occurred recently in Fik following rebel attacks earlier in the month

¶4. The UN Humanitarian Air Service which provided shuttle service to Dire Dawa from Addis was grounded following the MSF/S event and remains grounded by Ministry of Defense authorities. No specific reason has been given to the UN for this decision. The GoE authorities did permit the plane to medevac a seriously ill NGO staff member last week. The UNHAS plane is funded by USAID/OFDA.

Agriculture and Livestock

¶5. The "Gu" rains, which should have fallen in the last months, were distributed unevenly across the region and described as poor by most stations reporting. The result is poor pasture regeneration affecting livestock herds, which have migrated earlier than normal to greener areas of the region such as Harshin, Hamaro, Fik, Gode, and Filtu, where rains were comparatively better. In some areas there have been up to 3 failed rainy seasons, devastating the livestock herds. Up to 15 percent of camels, 20 percent of cattle and 35-40 percent of shoats have perished in some areas according to regional authorities. Some pastoralists have lost their entire herds leading to total destitution and migration of pastoralists to towns seeking support from relatives. Efforts are intensifying to deliver mobile health services to surviving animals, but the numbers of marketable animals has seriously declined affecting the terms of trade for pastoralists trying to purchase grains.

Water Situation

¶6. The poor rainfall has affected water availability for humans and animals. According to a UNICEF mission report, eleven villages in Warder district are in urgent need of water, but only seven are covered by the current emergency water tankering operation run by the international NGO Action Contre La Faim (ACF). In the absence of water tankering in some areas, populations are abandoning their villages to migrate to where they can obtain water. The District Education bureau in Warder reports that all 22 schools have been closed for the last two months due to the drought. A UN staff member working in the region opined that in the coming weeks, if no solution to the water crisis is found, i.e. through additional tankering, there could be mass migration of populations in the region searching for water.

Health and Nutrition

¶7. The health situation is deteriorating rapidly, with serious outbreaks of AWD (likely cholera, but tests have not yet confirmed this) reported throughout the region, including in Warder and Korahe Zones with high death tolls in all areas. Recent reports from the health zone in Boh indicate up to 34 children have died in some 11 villages surveyed during the period July 13 - 17, 2008. A UNICEF team was told that an additional 35 children had died in four other villages. Most of the deaths had occurred within the preceding 2-4 weeks In Geladi District, also in Warder zone, there were 58 deaths reported from suspected AWD, with most occurring in Saaraye village some 70 km north of Geladi town. Kebredehar and Shilabo districts of Korahe zone have been reporting AWD since May. UNICEF mobile health teams, funded by USAID/OFDA, are working in the Somali region but able to cover only a fraction of the villages that need to be served. UNICEF tells USAID/OFDA there is an urgent need to invest in the static health centers where there are populations in order to ensure more consistent care.

¶8. Malnutrition rates are rising rapidly, although the data is

difficult to obtain and surveys have either not been permitted by central authorities or - as in the case of Fik - results were not permitted by the regional government to be released. In the case of Warder where the situation is known to be serious, the survey done in April was endorsed by the ENCU and regional authorities but results were disputed by federal authorities. Results are currently blocked until the DPPA decides what to do. In the meantime, MSF/H reported treating 200 children for severe acute malnutrition (SAM) in one week in Warder hospital. ADRA, working in Kelafo with OFDA funds, reports a 60 percent rise in admissions since February/March. In Bare, Afder zone, SC/US reports deaths from malnutrition in the health center. SC/US has dispatched a nutritionist to the region (including to parts of Borena that are particularly drought affected) to gather as much information as possible and report back by July 9.

Food Aid

¶9. Food availability is a very serious concern and the need for food aid is rising rapidly. Harvests failed in all production areas of the Somali region. In Fik and Hamaro markets, there is no maize or sorghum, and limited supplies of all other food stuffs such as rice and wheat flour. Gode also is reporting rising food prices and no availability of locally-grown foods. In Degehabur, severe food shortages are reported, exacerbated by the arrival of populations migrating from other zones. Similar stories are emerging from all parts of the region. Poor terms of trade between livestock and food make it difficult for pastoralists to access what food is available. WFP is currently undertaking, with DPPA as the lead, to deliver relief food to the region, but the amounts actually distributed to beneficiaries are a fraction of what should have been provided.

¶10. According to a recently-released WFP report, 33 percent of the food dispatched between January and June was actually distributed to the target caseload of 1.025 million beneficiaries. There are chronic delays in the turnaround of trucks between pick-up points at warehouses and the final distribution points. Institutional inefficiencies on the part of DPPA are exacerbated by the special challenges of transporting and distributing food in conflict zones. Military escorts, required for all food distribution convoys, are unpredictable. Military or local government officials frequently require truckers to offload in unplanned locations with no forewarning, usually in woreda capitals. Reasons given are the migratory nature of some of the beneficiaries, as well as the special challenges of food destined for areas not controlled by the Government. Not bringing the food to final distribution points makes it more difficult for populations already weakened and vulnerable to collect their food, some reportedly walking 30 - 50 kilometers. The constraints identified in earlier USG HAT assessments have not been relieved (reftel), and food aid continues to fall way short of targets and needs. NOTE: To improve performance in food deliveries, WFP suggested a few months ago a hub-and-spoke concept to Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Agency (DPPA). Getting the GoE to agree to structural changes is difficult, and the suggestion was turned down. However, with the food crisis worsening, WFP is negotiating another forward hub proposal with DPPA.

¶11. In a briefing with USG HAT in June, UN (OCHA) staff working in the region said that the DPPB capacity to deliver food is "appalling" and is not properly targeted to the vulnerable. The staff mentioned reports from the area that traders purchase food aid for re-sale. NOTE: The USG HAT followed this up with WFP, who explained that - because of the long distances to carry their food -- some people actually store their food with relatives or commercial establishments, and that large-scale selling of food aid is not taking place. End NOTE. The same OCHA staff told the USG HAT that unless a rapid response capacity is geared up by the international community "people will start dying like flies". During a meeting between visiting senior WFP Rome staff and USAID on June 27, WFP opined also that "extraordinary logistics" will very soon be required to pull the region back from the abyss of total disaster, if the current level of relief is not augmented and administered much more efficiently. NOTE: The GoE announced on June 10 that it was diverting all food delivery trucks from Somali region, to attend to food delivery in other parts of the country.

This decision was only reversed in late June after significant donor protest.

¶12. USG HAT for Somali recognized as early as January and February 2008 that a crisis was looming in the region and recommended immediate interventions to improve food aid deliveries, launch measles campaigns, improve water availability and improve security support for the international community (REFTEL). Over USD 6 million has been programmed to respond in these areas. At present US NGOs funded by OFDA are working in Degabur, Kebrehahar, Gode, Kelafo, Warder, Afder, Fik and Jijiga. USAID/Ethiopia through the Pastoral Livelihood Initiative is supporting interventions to preserve pastoral livelihoods through the Pastoral Livelihoods Initiative. USAID/OFDA has contributed USD 1 million to the program to assist in additional emergency response in the livestock sector. Food for Peace has contributed substantially to food aid generally in Ethiopia. A contribution of over USD 100 million included a substantial contribution specifically for the Somali Region through the World Food Program and other partners. Food for Peace has also deployed an expert to the now country-wide USG HAT to continue following up on the issue of food deliveries.

Somali Region being forgotten?

¶13. NGOs and the UN are expressing concern that the disaster in the Somali region is fading from the front page, as the enormity of the food security crisis in the rest of the country is being revealed and tight GoE restrictions on humanitarian assessments and access remain in place throughout Somali region. And with logistics, politics and security so problematic in Somali region, it is easier for the international community to turn its attention to the more accessible regions where data is available and logistics are more manageable.

¶14. All indicators point to dire observations coming true. Over the coming weeks, WFP and NGOs, as well as donors, need to step up attention to the Somali region, with particular focus on food aid distributions, nutritional support and AWD response. USAID/OFDA is committing additional resources in the water sector to improve access to water and to assist NGOs to prepare for AWD outbreaks. The USAID/HAT continues to monitor closely the allocation and distribution of food to the region reported by WFP. The team will make a visit to Jijiga to meet with partners on July 5-6, 2008.

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